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## **Enabling staff development praxis: establishing effective journeys through the looking glass of widening participation perception**

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Higher education has always aspired to be seen to encourage open access to all types of learner including those with vocational qualifications. The reality of participation rates for such vocational learners is low (about 18%), however the reasons for such levels appear to mainly be reflected in perceptive issues amongst employers, learners and educational staff rather than procedural or technical barriers within qualifications themselves. Key to aiding progression are staff in higher education and the associated development opportunities they can access. Accepting there are issues specific to certain occupational strands in higher education, it is a clear cross-party political intent to encourage further progression of vocational learners and indeed to increase the whole vocational delivery of such provision as apprenticeships. Recent announcements around fee levels and demands for visible efforts relating to widening participation make the requirement to increase progression levels critical to the future of educational pathways.

There is also a clear demand for such vocational qualification pathways from a cohort of interested learners, supported by employers, all with an intention towards progression. Accepting there is a case for widening participation, associated change within Higher Education (HE) appears to require staff development support to ensure such change occurs. This paper outlines some of the key activities, operated by the Western Vocational Lifelong Learning Network (WVLLN) that can successfully be adopted to encourage such learners and ensure higher education meets the aspirations for widening participation to this key cohort.

*Keywords:* staff development; widening participation; vocational learners; professional practice

### **Introduction**

Widening participation has been a social aspiration manifesting itself in many ways from Victorian-era philanthropy to latter-day evolution of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA). Following the Second World War the main social and political debates have centred on the equality of educational opportunity. The 1944 Education Act was the start of the movement to enshrine the aspiration of opening education up to all those under-represented groups. Essentially, future years built on this foundation to ensure equality to all social groups, employment types or disability. Economically, progression is vital to a developed economy and politically it is also essential for governments to be seen to be supporting such aims.

It does appear that processes and cultural change required to inculcate such aims do not necessarily occur naturally within the educational establishment. There are notable individuals who are seen to successfully promote widening participation and there are clearly some very effective institutions. However, to ensure

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wider application of progression and sustainability such measures need active support to ensure they occur throughout the educational landscape. In particular this paper reflects on how perception of opportunity or progression routes is every bit as important as the actual defined processes of widening participation themselves. The perception of the staff whose remit is to extend these opportunities mirrors their own experiences and attitudes, as do those of the learners. Establishing whether such reflections are valid, reliable and sustainable was a vital part of the supporting staff development programmes.

This paper looks at the background to staff development and its role, and then focuses on methods within the Western Vocational Lifelong Learning Network's (WVLLN) operations that have been successful in developing widening participation. Finally, views are taken on how such processes can be part of a continual improvement and feedback cycle to ensure the best results in a changing future for education.

### **The importance of staff development**

Within all professions there is a presumption and often a requirement to undertake some form of continuous professional development (CPD), often with the professional body setting the standards. It is fundamental to those in further education though this varies from sector to sector with related professional standards and CPD requirements. For those in the further education arena, membership of the Institute for Learning comes with a directive to undertake a minimum of 30 hours of CPD per year, with part-time pro rata. For those teaching beauty therapy courses the requirements are stricter, with CPD being a mandatory 30 hours, of which most have to be linked directly to vocational practice.

For those in higher education, staff development is widely acknowledged as being important and 'central to the quality of higher education' (Fielden 1998 cited by Collis 2008) although it appears to be far less regulated. It appears to be concerned with teaching and learning rather than with the broader aspects of academic practice and related educational processes (Blackmore and Blackwell 2006). It would also seem to be more related to the operational aspects of the institutions than attempting to change the actual culture of the organisation. Hence widening participation in many instances requires active implementation to ensure both institutional relevance and perceptual changes where required amongst staff.

There are many instances of staff development activities relating to the improvement of an actual situation, such as sessions on conducting effective appraisals or improving access to resources for specific courses. Other times it may be used to show developments of enhancing learning due to technological improvements. There are arguments (Collis 2008) that in order to ensure effective development across all academic practice, staff development should be embedded into alternative support mechanisms such as peer mentoring. This type of support may be provided through ad hoc groupings of professionals collectively known as community of practice groups whose members, in order to learn and share their learning:

interact with each other, sharing information, insights and experiences, participating in discussions and raising issues and concerns regarding common needs and requirements (Nickols 2003, 4, cited by Collis 2008)

Collis (2008) questions whether such communities of practice would autonomously start themselves in widening participation activities, suggesting however that they would certainly benefit from ongoing support to ensure any suggestions are consistently implemented.

Staff development activities that attempt to broaden understanding of alternative routes into higher education and the associated qualifications are less well utilised, and many Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) have

attempted to embed such development activities into their work to support their progression agreements and other resources. Connor, Sinclair, and Banerji (2006) found that the pattern of the lack of vocationally qualified entrants was the result of a number of factors, with lack of awareness and knowledge, lack of clarity in terms of how vocational qualifications were presented, and perceptions held by HE staff about curriculum fit amongst those identified.

Their recommendations focused on the improvement of knowledge of vocational qualifications by HE staff and the development of more positive attitudes towards those learners applying to higher education with non-traditional qualifications. In order to address this it would appear that staff development could be one of the solutions. It is therefore important to accept a broader definition of staff development which embraces the personal development necessary to support decision making, thereby ensuring that fairer access includes those attempting to access higher education from what might be considered the deficit model.

The issue of the definition of staff development is raised by Osei (1996) who observes that: 'staff development and personnel development are often used interchangeably or synonymously. Either use, however, escapes a concise and precise definition' (31).

Staff development should not simply be seen as a process of acquiring skills, but should include the process of self-awareness (Tuckman 1965). However if one confines the aim of staff development to the improvement of the job effectiveness of the individual together with achieving organisational objectives, then the emphasis on the increase in professional development is marginalised. One could argue that if professional development is increased through staff development then it may, as a direct consequence, impact on the achievement of organisational objectives. Hence if widening participation (WP) is an institutional objective, then staff development activities will assist in the process. With current discussions around institutional access agreements and the requirements for enhanced WP activities in return for increased fee levels, WP remains at the heart of institutional agendas.

As previously argued, staff development should be seen as having a broad remit. The provision of training seminars, workshops and one-to-one support are certainly valid and have been used by many to develop staff. In addition there are arguments (Wellburn et al. 1993; Strickland 1988; Archer 1992) to support the inclusion of action research as having a distinct part to play in staff development. Through the further education (FE) development projects that the WVLLN supported, many of the staff were engaged with action research as part of the process. Evaluation from the staff involved highlighted the importance of the projects in terms of staff development and the application of knowledge gained to academic and reflective practice: 'action research is thus recommended as a model for staff development, and as part of one's professional education' (Wellburn et al. 1993, 163).

This view is further supported by Belanger (1992), who views action research as a powerful tool for teacher education at all levels from both teacher training and in-service perspectives. Wellburn et al. (1993) suggest that this perspective avoids the traditional school-university relationship as the investigation is one chosen by the teacher, giving them more ownership and involvement. They refer to Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) and Riecken et al. (1992) and conclude that: 'action research offers a perspective that encourages teachers to consciously and explicitly direct some of their energies toward solving problems of practice' (Wellburn et al. 1993, 163).

It is easy to lose sight of the purpose of training and staff development (Oldroyd 1995) and perhaps a way forward would be viewing all activities - both obvious and less obvious - as training, thereby establishing a 'learning organisation'. There is also the dilemma of how to deal with those staff who do not see or recognise the value of training:

They have little to learn and are in any case so busy already that the last thing they want is another responsibility for which they feel inadequately remunerated or appreciated.  
(Oldroyd 1995, 15)

The concept of employee-level staff development (Eley and Eley 1995) is one that appears to work well in the 'highly individualized nature of traditional university culture' (25) where individual staff initiate their own staff development activities. However this presupposes an awareness and understanding of what areas and skills need to be developed and where this development can be accessed. Through the research carried out in universities and colleges by the WVLLN it became apparent that it was only when it was pointed out to the staff where their knowledge was insufficient (or in some cases incorrect) that areas for development could be identified. In addition, in order for this model to be successful there are two essentials: firstly, time, and secondly, motivation. If, as discovered, the majority of higher education staff have progressed via the academic model and can fill places in their institutions with A-level candidates, where is the motivation to learn more about vocational qualifications and associated skills, knowledge and experience? The other essential ingredient to successful effective staff development is the requirement for the staff to be active and to comprehend how to take the knowledge acquired and apply it to their own practices. Simply delivering programmes of development will not enable changes in culture, and to be seen to do so will simply relegate such processes to mundane staff attendance at events to assuage third-party concerns around widening participation. One also needs the 'buy-in' from staff that such development is important and will add to their understanding and awareness, which in turn will enable their institution to effectively facilitate widening participation and fairer access.

In conclusion, staff development is a useful activity and if handled effectively can support organisational objectives. Given that widening participation is a key objective, ensuring that staff development includes this as a theme appears both logical and effective. However it is vital, in order to deliver value for money and concrete results, that such development activity deliver perceptual change and results. The exact nature of such effective activities is considered in the next section.

### **What is the aim of staff development relating to widening participation?**

In order to consider the aim of staff development in relation to widening participation for those following vocational pathways, one needs to explore the issues that concern those learners. Studies (Connor, Sinclair, and Banerji 2006; Collis 2008; Thomas et al. 2007) have explored the admissions issues which affect the entry of vocationally qualified learners and their progression to degree-level study. Key findings point to a lack of knowledge and awareness about vocational qualifications in admissions teams, misconceptions about the commitment of young people from different entry requirements and their ability to succeed, and the on-going lack of parity of esteem between academic and vocational pathways (Connor, Sinclair, and Banerji 2006, 3).

Recommendations from these studies suggest that what is needed is an improvement in knowledge about vocational qualifications amongst those in higher education, which would in their view require, 'different approaches in staff development and information provision within institutions' (Connor, Sinclair, and Banerji 2006, 5). In addition, the findings from the Thomas et al. study in 2007 concluded that there was a lack of

awareness amongst FE tutors and level-three learners about progression and the issue of transferability, and that learners could indeed progress onto higher level programmes which did not directly mirror those taken at level three, thereby providing them with the same breadth of choice that A-level learners are given. Therefore not only is progression and widening participation not innate in staff development activities, it is recommended that discrete approaches are taken. Whilst this paper has found examples of integrated mainstream development activities, discrete options do appear to be more effective.

The WVLLN initially set out to discover if there was a defined need for widening participation activities. Adequate statistics for levels of progression from vocational qualifications were hard to identify, but research at local higher education institutions (HEIs) carried out by Thomas et al. (2007) confirmed that vocational progression was low and usually linked to specific vocational pathways. This research resulted in the identification of areas which would support the work of the WVLLN. Three key areas were identified as requiring LLN attention. Firstly, information, advice and guidance (IAG) was identified as being essential to, 'building the awareness, confidence and to some extent, the desire to progress into education...appropriate for the individual' ( Thomas et al. 2007, 14). Secondly, the report also identified the necessity for HE/FE liaison and communication, as the research showed: 'a limited knowledge of the broad spectrum of HE qualifications either outside the vocational discipline, or beyond the traditional model of a three-year full-time degree' (Thomas et al. 2007, 14). Finally, the extent to which transferability of qualifications was observed, together with a need to have this supported by the staff development activity of the WVLLN practitioners.

Naturally one main activity of the LLNs was to engage with senior management in institutions to gain commitment to objectives and initiate action – some of which would be through staff development. If one takes the view that it is purely for the achievement of organisational objectives, then perhaps LLNs had no remit to enter the world of staff development. In addition, the lack of existing engagement with widening participation within some staff development departments could be highlighted as further evidence to suggest that those departments did not see a role for LLNs and perhaps felt that LLNs should have limited their remit to progression agreements, curriculum development and enabling the curriculum. However, if one takes the broader view that staff development can enhance the professionalism of staff and develop their awareness of the broader educational landscape, which in turn can enhance the learning potential for the learner, then the LLNs had an active responsibility to move into this arena.

In order to ensure that progression agreements were embedded into the culture of the partner institutions and sustained past the life of the LLN, it became obvious that support in terms of staff development would be necessary. It would not be as simple as introducing agreements and simply hoping that institutions would do the 'right thing', in theory providing vocational learners with the guarantee of parity of consideration. Indeed the very nature of developing the agreements themselves demonstrated that academics were rather sheltered in their knowledge of level-three qualifications other than A-levels. Conversations with admissions and subject tutors revealed considerable lack of knowledge and understanding of what vocational qualifications were and what skills, knowledge and experience vocational learners brought with them. Indeed if this was not the case, one could question the introduction of the LLNs in the first place. This is not to suggest that all admissions and subject tutors were unaware or unwilling to accept vocational qualifications - some were already accepting of such qualifications and understood what vocational learners brought to their institution. As the demands of widening participation needed cultural change, it became clear that staff development activities, along with other processes, would be fundamental to inculcating sustainable processes.

There was also the other side of the equation to consider and decisions with respect to the extent of staff development for the FE sector to be taken. Thomas et al. (2007) certainly found areas where the understanding of level-three tutors relating to progression was low. Concepts of professionalism research (Fisher and Fisher 2005) have revealed that many vocational lecturers, although consider themselves up to date in terms of subject-relevant CPD, did not see themselves as capable of undertaking higher-level study. Views such as these still permeate the profession and are transmitted to their own students. In addition, they are also likely not to have undertaken higher education study and therefore see it as less relevant to their own students. Given that many students report (Haywood and Molesworth 2010) the views of tutors as critical to their own decision-making process, is it likely that vocational students are at a disadvantage compared to those whose tutors have experienced higher education?

### **Process of launching widening participation strategies by LLNs**

In order to understand the need for LLN involvement in staff development it is useful to clarify the original rationale for the establishment of LLNs. The main rationale for the LLNs was to improve the coherence, clarity and certainty of progression opportunities for vocational learners into and through higher education. Although the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) identified the core characteristics which they expected an LLN to include, they expected different and innovative approaches to be taken. However a key element that was required of all LLNs was production of network-wide progression agreements.

Until the establishment of LLNs, progression agreements had tended to be localised arrangements between specific schools and departments within higher education institutions. Therefore it was with trepidation, and to some extent confusion as to what was actually required, that LLNs began the journey towards designing agreements that would span their networks. Much variation in strategy has been exhibited between LLNs, which have decided on diverse routes to the same general aims. The first stage within the WVLLN involved the team in an audit of existing arrangements that revealed limited local provision which was predominantly informal and for which there was inconclusive evidence of take-up.

It is widely accepted that much of the work associated with vocational progression issues comes down to attitudinal change which may be enabled through staff development activities. The limited time available to LLNs in terms of 'making a difference' was at the forefront of everyone's minds, as was a growing awareness of the limitations of facilitative instruments such as agreements. The impact of such agreements is lost without long-term support, development, publicity and maintenance.

The approach to progression that the WVLLN has used is that of transferability, which, it was hoped, would result in a wider application to either complement or extend previously limited specific arrangements. The main message that the WVLLN hoped to transmit was that transferability would support learners moving away from the deficit and compensatory model that has previously limited choice and hopes of progression. It is possible that agreements based around transferability may be able to survive local institutional change, which can undermine very specific relationships and arrangements. This process would certainly involve cultural change as well as process alterations within institutions. Indeed explaining the aims and concepts and overcoming many years of previously-held attitudes were key staff development challenges.

The WVLLN found that there were indeed many perceptions of the progression process. One could view these perceptions as a mirror in that staff in HEIs sometimes reflected their own views of vocational learners and their abilities, as opposed to what the learners themselves saw. However unless these perceptions were

sensitively adjusted so that each side gained insight of the other, no progress could be made. An underpinning perspective that vocational qualifications and experience had validity and value for study at a higher educational level had to be added to the mirror. Once that perception is inculcated then curriculum, pedagogy and admissions processes would follow.

Key to the success of these agreements has been the process of liaison, negotiation and mapping, which has clearly raised not only awareness, but a more comprehensive understanding of the strengths offered by vocational qualifications. It is this continual dialogue between admissions, registry and subject tutors that will ensure that the agreements are living documents, not just 'pieces of paper sitting on a dusty shelf somewhere'. In the process, these efforts clarified to all parties their own reflected images of widening participation that were valid and produced sustainable results. Active liaison with staff development departments clearly could aid such processes.

### **Effective staff development activities to support widening participation**

This section examines the effective staff development activities that the WVLLN undertook to aid widening participation and enhance vocational learners' progression. Initially there were overarching relationship-building activities and research into current perceptions of vocational qualifications, learners and progression. Then strategies that addressed the key areas of IAG, application processes and knowledge sharing were developed which could be used in a staff development context. Finally a range of activities were developed to ensure the widest communication of information and that the message of widening participation was inculcated through academic activity. Relationship building was key to effective change as without it, positive relationships and other activities, however well-intended, would have proved less than fruitful.

The following are some of the specific issues that have come out of these staff development activities that the WVLLN has been engaged with:

- There needs to be greater dialogue between HEI/FEIs /other providers.
- There has to be clarity over what individual universities will accept in terms of qualifications.
- There has to be up-to-date, clear, concise IAG for all (schools, FE and HE admissions).
- Specialist advice from HE is needed on the extended project, subject content, tariff, grades etc.

These findings then informed further directed activity from the LLN. The most successful activities are detailed below which also are useful for future changes.

### **Relationship building**

As part of the relationship building, the WVLLN offered a wide variety of staff development activities, ranging from FE tutor visits, seminars and workshops to one-to-one discussions with individual admissions and registry staff. As part of the evaluation currently being carried out there have been extremely positive comments in response to the support which the WVLLN has offered. This range of offers was provided to higher and further education institutions, private providers and other organisations involved in progression. Naturally these organisations could have provided their own activities but the LLN was able to offer timely, accurate and free input. This could then be coordinated with internal staff development and curriculum-change activities. Ensuring a joint approach is fundamental to successful organisational change.



Particular activities work better than others. The FE tutor visits to higher education institutions, which were developed to consolidate the WVLLN progression agreements, have continued throughout the life of the WVLLN and feedback received has shown that they are extremely valuable and have resulted in expanded relationships between HE and FE partners and developing relationships between departments, faculties and admissions. FE tutor visits have continued to grow and develop with involvement from an increasing range of colleges and HEIs. Each side of the process is able to understand how the other sees them and ensure that a valid picture of process and thought is produced. In order to expand this offer to private training providers, members of the team have been offering one-to-one training sessions, seminars, workshops and resources to assessors and training managers.

## **IAG**

Feedback from HE admissions tutors revealed that there was a gap in the IAG provided by FE tutors to prepare their students for the application process. In response to this clear staff development need the WVLLN organised many extremely successful events aimed at those responsible for supporting vocational learners in progressing to higher education. The main focus has been personal statements and references as these have been identified as key areas needing attention. Support has been provided by Inspiring Futures, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) and admissions tutors from partner institutions. Many of the events have been supported by Aimhigher West Partnership, in terms of both funding and personnel. Indeed, working collaboratively with Aimhigher has ensured a rationalisation of training opportunities to avoid duplication and a maximisation of the resources available to colleges, schools and partners.

In terms of key IAG processes, members of the WVLLN were invited to groups such as the FE forum to highlight admission tutors' reflections on anonymous examples of application forms from vocational learners. Other related training involved providing feedback from National Diploma students about their experience of studying at partner HEIs and the experiences of level-three vocational tutors on their visits to HE campuses involving talks with academic staff and admissions tutors. Such practical activities were shown on evaluation to be the most effective in developing staff approaches to effective admissions behaviour.

In order to support admissions and registry, the WVLLN has provided staff development training to HE admissions tutors on the Access to HE Diploma Grading and the curriculum content of the Advanced Diplomas. This support has consisted of one-to-one meetings as the areas under discussion were sufficiently complex to require such direct staff development support. This was found to aid many aspects of the organisations including development of prospectuses.

Further examples of the staff development offered through the WVLLN include an event which was aimed particularly at school staff and Connexions advisors, which the University of Bath's Broadening Participation Team and the WVLLN progression coordinators worked in collaboration to organise and run. The aim was to showcase an interactive approach to raise awareness and understanding of foundation degrees and the portfolio being offered across the region. Positive feedback was received, but what was of particular interest to the delegates was hearing first-hand from foundation degree students about their experiences. It also allowed for interesting discussions concerning the HE and FE institutional perspectives.

Therefore, ensuring the tutors had access to up-to-date IAG information and support is vital to any widening participation exercise. Most of these activities needed direct communication with individuals or groups rather than paper or e-communications as the need to ask questions, describe complex areas and challenge existing

views or progression was key. Incorrect perceptions could be challenged whilst correct perceptions reinforced – all in an effective and ongoing process of continual improvement.

## **Knowledge sharing**

There was clearly a wide base of existing and developing knowledge amongst partner institutions. To gain maximum impact beyond the initial efforts of the LLN it was decided to enable knowledge-sharing networks to produce additional distribution. In addition, such networks could challenge any pre-existing or emerging views regarding widening participation as a natural course of delivery. As a staff development tool, information sharing is extremely useful in extending diverse thoughts across individuals and organisations, allowing constructive reflection and debate. The tool is both immediate and also extremely cost-effective compared to other methods of engaging staff collaboration. However it does rely on inculcating enthusiasm for using such technology or it may achieve little engagement.

There are many different contexts in which the term ‘knowledge management’ is used. One that appears to relate to a policy-driven organisation has been noted by Collison and Parcell (2004):

It’s not about creating an encyclopaedia that captures every-thing that anybody ever knew. Rather it’s about keeping track of these who know the recipe, and nurturing the culture and the technology that will get them talking (16)

As part of the knowledge management support provided to the new diplomas, and latterly extended across the entire widening participation arena, the WVLLN supported the development of the External Knowledge Exchange Network (EKEN). The EKEN is a regional initiative funded by the WVLLN and led by the University of the West of England, Bristol. The EKEN creates virtual and physical spaces for discussion, enquiry and knowledge exchange, focusing on 14-19 developments in the WVLLN area and progression to HE. It provides an accessible knowledge, collaboration and development resource for staff.

In addition, a series of workshops aimed at supporting all those involved in the 14-19 educational arenas have been offered across the whole of the south-west following the end of the South West LLN. Taking note of the comments made by Sharpe (2004) that ‘action research is another good example of context-based development activity’, the WVLLN supported the establishment of the 14-19 EKEN Awards and have funded four action-orientated projects related to specific issues and questions arising from the 14-19 agenda and progression to higher education. The most popular aspect of this has been the direct communication activity of events and workshops but the electronic forum has been little used. This reinforces the value of face-to-face support and the need to develop pedagogies to encourage best use of electronic formats. To support the continuation of this initiative the WVLLN Board approved the funding of EKENplus, which will continue this valuable aspect of staff development activity.

Trying to change attitudes and values in terms of direct informational provision is probably futile, and the way to bring about organisational change is to change behaviour (Hope and Hendry 1995; Beer, Eisenstat, and Spector 1993). To that end, delivering staff development activity around providing information and guidance on progression issues could be thought of as an effective way of delivering changes in behaviour.

## **Wider activities**

Collaboration with other interested institutions and organisations has enabled wider communication of WVLLN objectives. However initiatives have also focused on individual practitioners who could be tasked

with changing attitudes and culture from the bottom up. Together these efforts produce the best results in terms of committing entire organisations to change. The medium used in several cases was effective staff development.

One example where effective collaboration did produce synergistic results concentrated on disseminating best practice was the funding of two Apprenticeships projects. In these projects the WVLLN has, in collaboration with Aimhigher, encompassed staff development by providing training on progression pathways for training advisers. This ensured the dissemination of best practice through the development of resources both in the home institutions and in wider dissemination to other providers. Each institution alone could not have produced the quality of resources or managed the dissemination to such an extent without the collaboration of the other. It also sharpened the perceptions of both organisations of the strategic objectives of the widening participation journey.

Education is in an era where initiatives can be produced at great speed – thereby requiring immediate effective actions and debate on how to implement such initiatives. Communication is key and WVLLN has used forums to engage with partners in effective debate and implementation. One example is the Regional HE 14-19 Strategic Group, which was developed to facilitate open discussion around the 14-19 agenda and what was being offered regionally in terms of progression information and support. The group included representatives from a wide range of partners including the Department for Education (DfE), 14-19 local authority advisors, partner HEIs, the National Apprenticeship Service (NAS), Aimhigher and FE colleges, and was designed to bring together organisations that did not meet regularly to discuss progression issues. Members of this group have valued the opportunity to discuss potentially delicate issues in a non-threatening forum and have agreed to continue to meet following the end of the WVLLN. The group will in fact act as the steering group for EKENplus and as such will continue to collaborate on issues related to 14-19 and progression for non-traditional learners.

Finally, longer-term solutions were produced to inculcate staff change and development from the ‘ground up’. At an individual level a series of small action-research projects - 16 in total - were funded. These were designed to support progression innovation in the individual institution and had to, as a condition of the funding, produce a ‘deliverable’ that could be used by any institution in the network. This tapped into individual enthusiasm and innovation directed towards progression activities. Additionally, as the project was within the institution, it enabled or supported cultural change within the organisation rather than the LLN resorting to purely external activities. The projects also enabled the staff to enhance their own skills in research, project management and the development of innovative ideas. As many of the projects involved innovation in teaching and learning, changes to previously-held perceptions occurred:

Professional knowledge is no longer viewed as just consisting of a standardized, explicit and fixed knowledge base. It is now seen as knowledge which exists in its use, is ethical in its use and is changed by experience. The distinctive nature of professional knowledge lies in the interplay between its construction and use. (Sharpe 2004, 137).

## **Conclusion**

Overall these staff development activities were designed to build relationships, produce informed IAG, share knowledge and use the best communication methods available to generate change. They have attempted to facilitate change to previously-held perceptions of vocational learners and their needs, and to this end the WVLLN can claim some level of success. FE tutors in many partner colleges are now more aware of the

potential of their learners to progress onto a wider range of higher education programmes. As a direct result of the FE tutor visits, a number of vocational learners have visited partner institutions and the HE tutors have responded by putting on a range of workshops and talks. There have also been changes within partner HEIs in that there has been an increase in vocational learners being offered places and an increase in the understanding of what these learners can offer.

It is apparent that without information about qualifications and progression issues being distributed to those that need it, learners will be disadvantaged. There is a lack of awareness amongst some admissions tutors about what certain vocational qualifications are and the transferable skills such learners bring to higher education. There is also a lack of understanding amongst some further education tutors as to the importance of personal statements and references. One cannot assume that staff at colleges understand higher education and the issues that vocational qualifications and learners raise with admissions tutors, nor how appreciative staff are when time is spent going over issues in a non-threatening environment.

Whilst all these staff development activities addressed ongoing issues in education at the time of delivery, they are all sufficiently generic to be fruitful for the future. Indeed the nature of change in the educational landscape is fairly constant – therefore change has to be a continual process. Ensuring effective information sharing and relationship building within staff development activities should inculcate sufficient cultural change to embed effective widening participation. That leaves the wider question, for future development and research, of what is ‘sufficient’ widening participation in a developing world of changing economic fortunes, perceptions of worth, politics and migration.

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